DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 125 PS 018 389

AUTHOR Lawler, S. Dianne
TITLE Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences: A Guide for Student Teachers.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Check Lists; *Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; *Objectives; *Parent Teacher Conferences; *Teacher Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Competencies; *Communication Context

ABSTRACT

Student teachers are provided with guidelines for preparing, conducting, and following up parent-teacher conferences. Conference preparation is viewed as essential. A list of eight general objectives for planning conference activities is provided. Subsequent discussion focuses on scheduling and the atmosphere for the conference. Communication techniques, such as reflective listening, use of open responses, and avoidance of educational jargon are described. Potential areas of conflict are mentioned. Concluding discussion provides an example of an effective conference situation. Included in the text are a list of do's and don'ts for conferencing and a conference checklist that teachers can use to evaluate their conferencing behavior. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

A Guide for Student Teachers

George Peabody College for Teachers
of Vanderbilt University

by

Dianne Lawler

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Dianne Lawler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED313125

PS 018389

Introduction

Parents visit schools for a variety of reasons. They attend PTA meetings, the school carnival, back-to-school night, a mother-daughter tea, fathers' night, and for one of the most important reasons - parent-teacher conferences. Parents want to be informed of their children's progress and conferences are an important and effective method of communicating with parents.

Ideally, parent involvement starts before the school year begins. Some ways to initiate this involvement include sending home information packets, inviting parents and children to visit the school, providing and sharing information with parents at registration, and planning those first days of school in ways which will help parents and children adjust easily. After school begins, parent-teacher conferences become a vehicle for facilitating meaningful communication between home and school.*

Many school systems do not schedule formal conference days, but teachers may schedule them whenever they feel that something should be shared with parents. It is recommended that conferences be scheduled not only to inform parents of problems and concerns, but also to share progress, accomplishments, and other positive information as well. Many teachers feel the need to meet with all parents at least once per semester.

The purpose of this guide is to help you prepare, conduct, and follow-up parent-teacher conferences when you begin teaching. Conferences are an important facet of the total teaching-learning cycle. They should provide parents and teachers with opportunities to plan for the improvement of instruction and work together to develop the best possible learning environment for the child.

*(Adapted from: Working with Parents. Shari E. Nedler and Oralie D. McAfee, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1979.)

Preparation for Conferences

It is essential that the teacher prepare and plan carefully prior to the conference by analyzing the child's previous records, current preformance and attitude, and relationship with peers, and gathering samples of work, along with recent standardized test results. Throughout the year, teachers should make a practice of accumulating anecdotal records, tests, workbooks, art projects, and papers that represent both academic and extracurricular areas. Students may then compile a notebook or folder of samples of their work to share with parents during conferences. (This activity also provides students and teachers with an opportunity to assess and discuss the students' work.) Standardized test results should be used to supplement informal assessment tools rather than as a diagnostic measure of the child's achievement.

When children are taught by more than one teacher or have contact with numerous specialists, these professionals should be consulted and may choose to attend the conference. Consideration should be given to the parent, however, in that they may feel threatened by the ratio. Special care should be taken to assure parents that all specialists are there to clarify and work with all conference members as a "team".*

Conferences progress more smoothly when they are planned with specific objectives in mind. Following are some general objectives which may be helpful in planning a conference:

1. To gain a team member (the parent) in the education of the child
2. To document the child's progress for the parent
3. To explain the educational program that you are using with the individual child
4. To learn about the child's home environment
5. To allow the parents to express feelings, questions, and concerns
6. To study the parent-child relationship and gain understanding of the parents' expectations for that child
7. To establish and maintain communication among parent, teacher, and child
8. To establish cooperative goals for the education of the child *

*(Adapted from: Parents as Partners in Education. Eugenia Hepworth Berger, St. Louis, Missouri: C.V. Mosby, 1981.)

Scheduling

Your school may have formally scheduled conference days and a form letter sent to all parents in order to plan for the conferences. If the school does not plan for conferences and you would like to conference with all parents, a note should be sent to each parent asking for their time preference. A telephone call from the teacher adds a personal note. The teacher may especially want to call parents who do not respond to the conference invitation notes. Notes with the time and date of the conference clearly stated should be sent to ensure that both the teacher and parent have the same understanding of the conference time.

An Example:

Dear _____,

I am looking forward to meeting with you. I enjoy _____'s contribution to the class through his/her interest in _____. The time and date of the conference is _____. If you are unable to attend at the specified time, please call the principal's office _____ or send a note so that I can arrange a more convenient time to meet with you.

Thank you,

_____

(Personally sign each note)

Atmosphere for the Conference

Most conferences are held in the child's classroom at school in order for parents to visually "see" the room, the environment, and "feel" the atmosphere in which the child participates daily. The teacher should select a location that is quiet and allow adequate space and privacy. The conference may be more relaxed if comfortable chairs are situated so that the parent and teacher may face each other. A teacher sitting behind a desk or across a table may prove to be frightening to the parent, or establish a barrier that limits communication.

Communication Techniques

Effective communication is the most essential ingredient to the success of parent-teacher conferences. Attentive listening and reflection are crucial to the flow of information between the parent and teacher. During the conference, a teacher should speak only 50% of the time. When the teacher recognizes that the conference is a sharing process, half the burden has been lifted from her shoulders. They can use half the time to become acquainted with the parent and learn about the child's home environment.

Reflective listening is essential in order for the teacher and the parent to respond to the other's statement. An awareness of open and closed responses is necessary in order to use reflective listening and to maintain an open, respectful flow of ideas, feelings, and beliefs with the parents. Open responses invite continued dialogue, but closed responses require little elaboration or thought and stop further discussion and inquiry. Some examples of open and closed responses follow:

CLOSED RESPONSE

Parent: I'm concerned about John's progress in math.
Teacher: If John would work harder, he would not have a problem.

OPEN RESPONSE

Parent: I'm concerned about John's progress in math.
Teacher: You're worried about John's progress in math?

CLOSED RESPONSE

Teacher: I'm concerned about John's progress in math.
Parent: That's your job. Can't you teach him?

OPEN RESPONSE

Teacher: I'm concerned about John's progress in math.
Parent: You're worried about John falling behind in math?

During the conference be sure to stay "tuned in" to what the parent is communicating. Communication includes body language as well as the spoken word. Eye contact, forward posture, body response, and touch are important positive elements which may communicate to the parent that you are listening, you support them, and encourage the "team apporach" to education.

Specialized language and technical terminology may create barriers and prevent communication. Talk to the parent in his/her language and use terms which will easily be understood by the parent. If you are aware that the parent is confused or that he/she does not understand what you are trying

to communicate, take time to explain, simply, what you are saying. Parents will appreciate your sincerity and understanding.

Conflicts

Occasionally, there may be a conscious or unconscious conflict between parent and teacher concerning what is best for the child. The conflict may exasperate the parent and the teacher. A skillful teacher, however, may anticipate such problems, and make a special effort to consider the parent's feelings, beliefs, and concerns for the child. The teacher should always be "professional" but keep in mind that the parent has a great influence on the child, and has entrusted you, the teacher, with the responsibility for the child's education. When no mutual agreement or understanding can be reached, the difference should be documented by the teacher and the building principal may be consulted to help reach an acceptable conclusion. Positive parent-school relations are very important in providing a positive learning environment for the child.

A Conference Situation (Example)*

Miss Irwin (the teacher) will meet with Kristen's mother, Mrs. Van Buren. Kristen is a very warm child and the first to befriend any new student in the class. She works hard and tries her best, but is still far behind the achievement level of most of the other children in her class. Miss Irwin tries not to compare the children's work, she also realizes that this can be a problem area for a parent. Parents often judge their child on how they compare with peers and not by their individual achievement. Miss Irwin wants to make Mrs. Van Buren understand that Kristen is doing well at her own level. Kristen does exceptional work in art, and Miss Irwin hopes that by emphasizing Kristen's abilities in art and her qualities as an individual, she can establish a positive foundation for the conference before dealing with Kristen's academic problems.

Mrs. Van Buren arrives and both parent and teacher introduce themselves. They walk around the room looking at the children's projects and also use this time to get acquainted. Mrs. Van Buren is especially pleased with the clay models that Kristen has made. Miss Irwin takes this cue and begins her conference by telling Mrs. Van Buren that Kristen does work hard, how she never stops trying, and about her abilities in art. She also tells Mrs. Van

Buren how Kristen is always asking questions and tries to do as much as she can at her own pace. Miss Irwin is enthusiastic about Kristen's progress and feels that Kristen will continue progressing at her own pace. She explains how Kristen has difficulty in reading and how both she and Kristen both decided to go back a level in her reader. Both she and Kristen are pleased with the progress they are making in this area.

Although Miss Irwin tells Mrs. Van Buren about Kristen's difficulties, she speaks with much hope. She explains to Mrs. Van Buren that she and Kristen have been working together in these areas and that progress is definitely being made. She makes Mrs. Van Buren feel relaxed and confident in Kristen's progress. She knows of her daughter's academic problem but realizes that Kristen is working hard and is doing well at her own pace. Mrs. Van Buren thanks Miss Irwin for her time and her help and then leaves. The next conference begins.

*(Example adapted from: Parent Involvement in the Home, School, and Community. George S. Morrison, Columbus, Ohio: Bell and Howell, 1978.)

Some Do's and Don'ts in Conferencing*

Don't:

1. Assume that the child's last name is the same as the parent's
2. Use terminology that has meaning for the educator but not for the parent
3. Refer to organizations, forms, tests, materials, or ideas by their initials
4. Begin by criticizing the child
5. Let your thoughts drift or your mind wander while the parent is sharing information about the child
6. Ignore a parent's question
7. Overgeneralize or paint unrealistic pictures
8. Conclude without planning together for future educational goals

Do:

1. Know the parent's name (look in permanent records to determine whether it is the same as the child)
2. Use simple, understandable terms concerning the child's progress
3. Give clear explanations so that parents understand to what or whom you are referring
4. Ask questions about and show interest in the child
5. Remind parents that they may ask questions at any time and that you will explain anything that is not clear
6. Begin on a positive note
7. Review your file and know enough about the child so that that the parent will see that you have taken a personal interest in the child's welfare
8. Stay on the subject - the child's progress and development
9. Encourage parents to contribute
10. Show concern that you understand the parent; frequently ask "Do you agree with this?" or "Do you have suggestions to add about this?"
11. Make note of an idea suggested by a parent
12. Maintain eye contact
13. Be honest and truthful, but tactful and sensitive to the parent's feelings
14. Base your discussion on objective observation and concrete examples of work
15. Deal in specifics rather than generalities
16. Evaluate needs and select methods for remediating deficiencies
17. Evaluate strengths and select methods of enriching those strengths
18. Plan together for future educational goals
19. Clarify and summarize the discussion
20. Be professional

*(List adapted from Parents as Partners in Education)

Conclusions About Conferencing

Parent-teacher conferences may provide invaluable opportunities to share and exchange information. The home and school have special responsibilities in meeting the needs of the child. Open and honest communication between the parents and teacher creates effective conference outcomes. As a professional, you must feel comfortable enough with your own abilities to set realistic goals for yourself, for the child, and for the parent. Expect imperfect solutions, some progress, and always the emergence of new needs, as you learn to communicate and relate to each other in the best interest of the child.

"The outcome of the conference should be a plan of action - what the teacher will do in the classroom to help the child acquire a skill or to develop new behavior patterns. Similar intervention strategies for the parents should be discussed. Those which are decided upon or that are selected should be ones that both the parent and the teacher feel they can reasonably implement. The conference is not a vehicle to place blame for the problem; it is an opportunity to devise approaches to changing the behavior."*

Conference Checklist

The following checklist, adapted from Parents as Partners in Education, may help you conduct a self-evaluation after the conference. Use this checklist to improve planning and preparation for conferences and to conduct more effective conferences with parents.

*(Cited from: Administering Early Childhood Education Programs. Joseph H. Stevens, Jr. and Edith W. King, Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1976.)

Conference Checklist

Yes	No	Did you
___	___	Prepare ahead by collecting ancedotal records, tests, papers, notebooks, workbooks, and art samples?
___	___	Provide exhibits, displays, or interesting reading materials for parents as they waited for their conferences?
___	___	Make arrangements for coffee, tea, or water for parents while they waited for their conferences?
___	___	Prepare you room with attractive displays of the children's work?
___	___	Welcome the parents with a friendly greeting?
___	___	Begin and end on a positive note?
___	___	Adjust your conference to the parents' needs and levels of understanding?
___	___	Develop clear objectives for the conference?
___	___	Say in descriptive terms what you meant, avoid educational jargon and use of initials?
___	___	Listen reflectively?
___	___	Use open, honest communication?
___	___	Avoid comparing students or parents?
___	___	Have an awareness of body language - yours and the parent's?
___	___	Work together to plan the child's educational program?
___	___	Summarize your decisions?
___	___	Begin and end on schedule? If not, did you plan another conference?